

So, you want to be a SYSOP?

by Noel & Kim Thomas

After seeing the movie *War Games*, we ran out and bought our first modem — an Atari 830 Acoustic. We soon found out that there were no local Atari Bulletin Board Systems (BBS). So, we took to the long-distance phone lines to locate Atari BBS's.

It wasn't long before my wife, Kim, wanted to be a system operator (Sysop) of her own bulletin board. After many calls to various boards, we found one that had an AMIS Bulletin Board program that we could download. No documentation was provided, although all the required programs were available. These consisted of: 1) the bulletin board program, 2) the message-base initialization program, 3) the message-base compactor program, and 4) the message-base expansion program.

Well, we had a modem and a program — now what?

After a few hours of examining the program, Kim decided what files were going to be necessary. The next step was to create each text file and run the initial program in order to set up the sectors for the messages, since we were just starting out.

The first text file to be created was the Welcome message. This is the first file the caller sees, so we had to think of a good name. After some thought we decided on the name S.P.A.C.E. It's an acronym for St. Petersburg Atari Computer Enthusiasts. This enabled us to incorporate a theme for the board patterned after the space shuttle.

Text files are constructed using a word processor. We found that **Text Wizard** by DataSoft proved to be the best, because it allows the use of inverse characters. The other text files that were created include:

Bulletins — Contain brief facts of interest, for sale, etc.

File Directory — Contains a list of current programs for download.

Help — Explains commands used in depth for new users.

Information — Tells a little about the BBS and the equipment used.

Joke — The weekly joke.

Member Log — A listing of all Board Members, their phone # and computer type.

Board Pass — Explains the password system to the new users.

Passfile — A file that contains the user's password, name, address, phone #, time limit and computer type code.

Other Boards — A list of other BBS's broken up into Atari & non-Atari.

Visit Library — The file that contains all the Public Domain software available from this BBS. The file is broken down into six sections: (Games, Music, Educational, Communication, Utilities, and Graphics).

Function — File containing the brief summary of the command list.

Zero-Gravity — This file includes game tips, programming tips and other Atari related topics.

This was the most time-consuming portion of the BBS set-up. Now that we had the message sectors allocated and the text files created, our work disk was finished, and we were ready for a trial run online.

The first two weeks we were running the board using an acoustic modem. This became a little tiresome, since it required using "ringback." A person would call, let the phone ring once, then call right back. We would then wait for the second ring and put the phone on the modem. Needless to say, as the calls increased, we soon grew tired of this and purchased a Hayes Smartmodem 300. (See a review of the Hayes Smartmodem 1200 on p.17.) Next came the dedicated phone line which let us expand our hours of operation.

After some experimentation we set the pins on the Smartmodem as follows:

Pin Number		Setting
DTR	1	UP
VERBOSE	2	UP
QUIET	3	DOWN
ECHO	4	UP
RING	5	UP
CARR. DET.	6	UP
RJ11	7	UP
NOT USED	8	DOWN

The modem cable was wired as follows:

Modem Pin		850 (RI)
Transmit Date	2	3 SEND(OUT)
Receive Data	3	4 REC.(IN)
Ground	7	5 GROUND
Carrier Detect 8		2 CRX(IN)
Data Ter. Rdy	20	1 DIR(OUT)
Ring Indicator	22	6 DSR(IN)

With the auto-answer modem, the SPACE BBS was off to a flying start.

We now began to find out about the daily work involved in being a Sysop. Each day there are passwords to add and backups to make of the work disk. Since we only selected 200 sectors for our message-base, we needed to use the compactor program about every 2 weeks. Soon it will be necessary to use the expansion program and increase the sector allocation for messages to 300 or more. The bulletins need to be updated, and the download files rotated on a weekly basis. Many hours are spent in the evenings chatting directly with the callers and answering their questions.

As you can see the Sysop's activities are many, but there are rewards, too. We have met hundreds of people through the BBS and have made many new friends. We have callers from all over the country, including one from Texas named Bugs Bunny!

Required hardware.

The hardware necessary to run your own BBS is:

An Atari 400 or 800 with 48K
At least 1 Disk Drive
Atari 850 Interface
Printer
Modem (preferably Hayes Smartmodem 300)

The SPACE BBS runs on an Atari 400 with 48K, with an Inhome B-Key Keyboard, two 810 drives, Hayes Smartmodem, 850 interface, and an Atari 820 printer.

BBS commands.

All bulletin boards have a list of commands that allow the caller to select which area to access. Since the theme of our BBS is a flight in space on a shuttle, commands are listed as your "Control Panel." The following commands can be found at the Control Panel:

Command	Function
A	Toggles Atascii/Ascii mode
B	Bulletins
C	Chat with Captain
D	Download Files
E	Enter Message
F	Files Available for Download
G	Goodbye/Logoff
H	Help with Commands
I	Information on Shuttle
J	Joke Corner
L	Toggles Linefeeds
M	Member Log
N	New User Password Application
O	Other BBS List
P	Private Message to Captain
R	Retrieve Messages
S	Summary of Messages
T	Time Remaining on this Flight
U	Upload Files
V	Visit Atari Download Library
W	Welcome Message
X	Expert User Mode
Y	Lists Local BBS
Z	Zero-gravity Chamber
?	Lists Functions

Common problems.

A common problem of Sysops is the board crasher. The Atari BBS software is unique in that the program is virtually "crash-proof." This is because, when the interface channel is opened in concurrent mode, no other input/output operations that use the computer I/O connector can be performed. This means that no peripheral, other than the keyboard and the screen editor, can be accessed while the modem channel is open. Some Apple boards are not so lucky, due to the fact that the knowledgeable "hacker" can get into the disk drive and even erase BBS files!

Of course, there is the problem of the callers who leave abusive messages on the board. By installing a "Password Only" message base, you can eliminate this from your system.

The weather can also be a foe of the Sysop. A thunderstorm can cause hundreds or even thousands of dollars of damage to your equipment. We recommend that the system be completely shut down during periods when lightning is expected.

Other considerations.

There are a few important questions that should be considered before starting your own Bulletin Board Service.

First, can you manage without your computer system, since running a BBS will tie up your equipment? You will be surprised at how much you miss working on the computer or playing games! Two complete systems allow you to have the "best of both worlds."

Second, are you ready to install another telephone line to be "dedicated" to the BBS or will the board keep your telephone busy for hours? The second phone line will entail some amount of additional expense on your part.

Third, are you prepared to spend 1 or 2 hours a day just for "housekeeping" duties for the board?

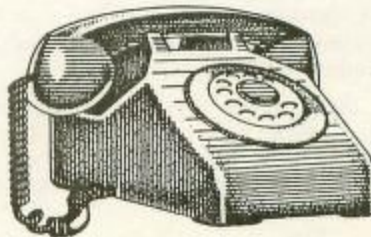
The updating and backup routines are important parts of keeping a BBS running smoothly.

Finally, remember that a good BBS is a dependable BBS. Using your equipment for 12 to 24 hours a day may require more equipment upkeep than usual. If the system does "go down" for repairs will you be able to get it fixed and running again quickly?

In conclusion.

Those of you who answered "yes" to the previous questions may have the makings of a Sysop.

Anyone who would like the software to start their own Atari BBS can call the S.P.A.C.E. Board at 813-344-3321 during Flight Hours (noon to midnight). Happy "modeming!" □



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